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A British and Historical Perspective on Workplace Governance. Kaufman and ‘The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations’

Howard Gospel*

Introduction

How work and employment are governed has always been a concern – for workers themselves, employers and managers, and the state. There are universal problems, but they have been tackled in different ways, at different times, in different countries. How they have been tackled has had profound consequences for economy and society. The aim here is threefold. The first task is to outline the Kaufman (2004) interpretation of the development and study of industrial relations. The second objective is to examine the Kaufman story critically, especially as it relates to the UK and US. In the space available, other Anglo-Saxon countries can only be touched on briefly. The third aim, drawing on the Kaufman thesis, is to consider ways forward in terms of theory and research. Little consideration will be given to the story of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA) which are a significant focus of the Kaufman volume.

As a convention, Industrial Relations is used here in upper case to describe the academic subject area and industrial relations in lower case to describe the actual practice. The same usage applies to other areas of the Social Sciences.

In *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations*¹, Kaufman presents the following thesis. Aspects of work and employment have long been subjects of interest to academic commentators. This interest, around what used to be called the “Labour Question” or more broadly the “Social Question”, continues to the present day. These concerns and Industrial Relations itself encompasses three topics: (i) the ethical, ideological, normative underpinnings of thought and action in the area; (ii) the ideas, concepts, and theories which have been developed to understand and explain arrangements and patterns; and (iii) how the first two may have the potential to help solve problems.

The intellectual origins of what came to be called Industrial Relations are to be found in the nineteenth century in a number of different traditions. Adam Smith and the classical economists were concerned with the division of labour, the fixing of

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¹ Bruce E. Kaufman: *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations: Events, Ideas and the IIRA*. International Labour Office Geneva, 2004, 722 pp.

wages, and the role which institutions might legitimately play in the labour market. In turn, Marx contributed notions such as stages of production, the distinction between labour and labour power, and the alienation of labour and inevitability of conflict. Later, neoclassical economists, introduced the notion of marginalism in wage fixing and took a largely negative view of interventions in the workings of the labour market. However, for one, Marshall was rather more favourably inclined towards trade unions and collective dealings in industry and may have actually coined the term “industrial relations“ (163). The German Historical Economics School, represented by among others Brentano, Schmoller, Sombart, Weber, Schumpeter, and Veblen and emphasising patterns of historical development of economic institutions, wrote on the emergence of the capitalist market economy, offered insights into worker organisation, and were concerned with methods of dealing with the social problem. Later, Institutional Economics in the UK and US was stimulated by and drew on all these traditions. Here the major works were the Webbs in the UK, in *The History of Trade Unions* (1894) and *Industrial Democracy* (1897), and Commons in the US, in numerous writings culminating in *Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (1924) and *Institutional Economics* (1934).

According to Kaufman, from the years just before the First World War, through the interwar years, and then through the trans-Second World War period, industrial relations was a major concern in many countries. However, the academic subject area of Industrial Relations was a US invention (at one point dated precisely as 1920) and Commons was its founder and the first person to publish scholarly work in the area (584 f.). This development occurred in the US for the following reasons – growing concern with the labour problem (employee voice, the management of labour, and conflict at work) and with the social problem (economic stabilisation and unemployment, social insurance, and employment protection laws). At first, Industrial Relations was the study of “all aspects of the employment relationship“ and encompassed two wings. The first was the Personnel Management wing, a diverse group, with a predominant interest in the management of labour and employee representation. The second was the Institutional Labour Economics wing, mainly economists, with more of an interest in trade unions and collective bargaining and in the role of state intervention in the labour market. The former tended to be sympathetic to management and more unitarist in basic beliefs, the latter more sympathetic to unions and pluralist in orientation.

In the UK, before the Second World War, Industrial Relations failed to progress much beyond the Webbs' initial foundations or to develop an institutional base. This was because prominent scholars (including the Webbs) had become less sympathetic to labour reform than their American counterparts, universities were unreceptive to the subject area, employers were less supportive, and unions more disinterested or antipathetic. There is some justification in this, but nevertheless some understatement of UK work at the time. Thus, at one point, for example, the Oxford academic, Cole, who produced many detailed and scholarly studies of workplace governance, is dismissed because his views were “not compatible with American style industrial relations and, indeed, were hostile to it“ (186).

The “golden age“ of American Industrial Relations covered the years 1945-60. As the subject developed, it sloughed off its Personnel Management wing and the Institu-

tional Labour Economics wing became predominant. In practice, this meant most academics in the emerging field tended towards an ideological position which increasingly favoured trade unions and collective bargaining. In a situation where these flourished, Industrial Relations came increasingly to be the study of formal collective relations at work. The period culminated symbolically in two major studies, those of Dunlop *Industrial Relations Systems* (1958) and Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison, and Myers *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (1960). Thereafter Industrial Relations declined in the US, the downward part of a decidedly inverted V-shape trajectory. The reasons for the decline included the following: the narrowing of the field to unions and collective bargaining, at precisely the point when these institutions were starting to wither; the failure to develop new ideas to match changing circumstances; the beginnings of the rise of Human Resource Management (HRM) and Organisational Behaviour (OB); the early rise of neo-liberalism and neo-classical Economics; and the beginnings of a new-found tendency to deductive model building and hypothesis testing in the Social Sciences. All of these have worked against Industrial Relations and have made for less interest in industrial relations.

At precisely the same time that Industrial Relations was starting to decline in the US, it was on the rise in the UK and that country experienced its “golden age” of Industrial Relations from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. The reasons for this growth were various – the rise in union membership, the spread of collective bargaining, especially at workplace level where it was thought to be particularly chaotic, and feelings among many managers and policy makers that these two developments had negative effects on economic performance. In the UK, the growth of the subject culminated in the so-called Oxford School (personified by scholars such as Flanders, Clegg, Fox, and Kahn-Freund). This approach was characterised by a focus on the “institutions of job regulation”, especially trade unions and collective bargaining. However, it differed from its US counterpart in that it was even more sympathetic to unions, rather less favourably inclined to state intervention, and “more to the left” (277). It also traditionally drew more from History and increasingly from Sociology rather than from Economics. For a time, some of these characteristics proved a boon, but increasingly became a bane. As the political, social, and intellectual climates changed from the late 1970s onwards, the inverted V-shape repeated itself and the decline of British Industrial Relations began.

As to other countries and the present and possible future, Kaufman describes the spread of Industrial Relations to other countries, at first within the Anglo-Saxon world, but also beyond, especially to continental Europe. There is a cautious suggestion here that the same inverted V-pattern may follow, though with different national trajectories and perhaps with less of a decline. Finally, at the end of the rather dismal recent story, Kaufman goes on to discuss ways forward. Two possible ways are suggested. First, Industrial Relations must develop its research and theory building; second, it must contribute to problem solving: in other words, it must earn its keep (622).

A consideration of the thesis

In assessing the Kaufman thesis, a number of considerations and distinctions must be made. First, the distinction between industrial relations and Industrial Relations must

be kept in mind. Of course, the state of the former has profoundly affected the latter (as Kaufman clearly shows), but nevertheless they are distinct stories. Second, it is also necessary to distinguish between ideas, theories, and research on industrial relations on the one hand and the institutionalisation of Industrial Relations on the other. The latter refers to the development of university departments, journals, professional associations etc. dedicated to Industrial Relations. Of course, again the two profoundly interact, but nevertheless they are distinct, to the extent that work on industrial relations has and can exist without Industrial Relations. In this article, the emphasis is more on the intellectual rather than the institutional foundations.

This then leads on to definitions of Industrial Relations. Kaufman is well aware of the difficulties involved here and presents several definitions and fairly outlines the definitions of others. Basically, these come down to broad v. narrow perspectives. Initially, the subject was defined broadly to cover “all aspects of the employment relationship” and some always favoured this. However, as already stated, in the golden ages of Industrial Relations in the US and UK, in practice it came to be defined more narrowly, to be concerned with more formal collective relations between employers and employees and in particular with trade unions and collective bargaining. Kaufman prefers the broader definition in terms of the study of all aspects of the employment relationship (albeit at one point suggesting it might be rather “vacuous” (629)) and sees one of the main reasons for the decline of the subject to lie in its shrinking perimeter and its narrower focus on unions and collective bargaining.

This reviewer has also always preferred a broad definition. Thus industrial relations may be defined to cover three broad and interconnected areas – work relations, employment relations, and management-labour relations. Work relations may be seen as covering the division of labour, the design of jobs and work, and the deployment of workers around technologies and production systems. Employment relations deals with the arrangements governing such aspects of employment as recruitment, training, job tenure, and reward systems. Management-labour relations are taken to cover the voice aspirations of workers and arrangements which may arise, such as forms of employee involvement, joint consultation, works councils, trade unions, and collective bargaining. Employers, employees and their organisations, and the state all play a role in shaping these areas, the outcomes of which constitute regimes of workplace governance (Gospel 1992).

Having stated the Kaufman thesis and provided some definitions, at this point, it should be said that *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations* is a true *tour de force*. In 722 pages, it covers important aspects of the history of Social Science thought, the development of Industrial Relations around the world, the role of the ILO and of professional associations, and throughout it places these in different historical and national industrial relations context. Kaufman was well placed to write such a book for a number of reasons: as an Economist, with heterodox leanings, he understands the issues in most of the main debates; as an Industrial Relations scholar, with a wide knowledge both of the literature and of different historical and national settings, he can look over time and across countries; and as a scholar, with sympathies towards one of the main actors in the story, viz trade unions, but not one who takes a soft “trade unions, right or wrong” position, he perceives the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of

workplace governance. Kaufman's earlier, equally impressive, volume *The Origins and Evolution of the Field of Industrial Relations in the United States* (1993) had already made him well qualified for the much wider task he undertook in writing this book.

It is not surprising, however, that there should be disagreements with such a wide-ranging and ambitious work. Indeed, it would imply that this is a rather anodyne account if no disagreements and critiques were registered. These are grouped together under three broad headings – the origins, the golden years, and ways forward.

The Origins

The first set of critiques concerns the early origins of Industrial Relations. This is not a purely historical exercise, because, as will be argued later, the interpretation of the origins and many of the strengths of early perspectives offer guides to what “went wrong” in the golden ages and to ways forward for Industrial Relations in the future.

In many ways, the first chapter on “The Roots” is the most intellectually stimulating part of the book. Kaufman is right to take us back to the classical and neo-classical economists and reactions to them. He is also right to remind us of the profound effect of Marx and his followers, both in terms of pluses and minuses. Very important is to bring to the attention of readers the tradition of the German Historical School of Economics, especially Brentano (1870) whose work on the origins of employer and employee collective action preceded that of the Webbs. Kaufman might also have added the writings of Böhm-Bawerk who offered an important perspective on how the extension of markets and the growth of firms shaped labour market institutions. Most important is to credit the Webbs, and this Kaufman does, referring to their “unparalleled accomplishments” (163), how they gave Industrial Relations its “original statement” (164), and describing *Industrial Democracy* as “the towering work” (586).

Yet, despite all this, we are told on several occasions that Industrial Relations had its origins in the US (188, 584 f.). Commons is rightly emphasised as a scholar of great originality and significance. However, two points should be made about Commons. First, he is probably more cited than actually read and his lengthy analysis lacks the clarity of that of the Webbs. Kaufman acknowledges this when he states, “It must be freely admitted that this book (his *magnum opus Institutional Economics*), both when published and up to the present date, has had a negligible influence” (102). Second, Kaufman approvingly cites commentators who suggest that Commons major theoretical contribution was the extension of the market thesis (313, 373, 612). Indeed, Commons's Shoemakers article (1909) is a classic study offering insights into how markets and firms shape work relations, employment relations, and management-labour relations. It is a model of Institutional-Historical Economic analysis. However, as the present writer has tried to show elsewhere (Gospel 2005), the ideas about market extension are to be found in the Webbs, if not in Smith. Indeed, the debt to the Webbs was always acknowledged by Commons. It is hoped that it is not too chauvinistic to suggest that the Webbs, rather than Commons, were the most original commentators on industrial relations and the true founders of Industrial Relations.

Kaufman suggests that through the interwar years there existed something which might be called Industrial Relations in the US but not in the UK. To this writer, it would seem that, in both countries before the Second World War, there were a num-

ber of second generation scholars with diverse interests in labour and social matters. Thus, in the US one might cite Perlman, Slichter, Leiserson, Wolman, Douglas, Mayo, and others. In the UK, there were Cole, Clay, Pigou, Hicks, and Beveridge, if we are to take a similar (and preferred) wide definition of the subject. Thus, in both countries, there were a number of scholars who took a broad view of the labour field, but in neither country was Industrial Relations really developed (see Locke, Piore, and Kochan (1995) xiii for a similar view). In so far as there was more activity in the US, this is not surprising given the relative size of the two countries and of their university systems.

The Golden Ages

Undoubtedly the golden age of American Industrial Relations occurred during the years 1945-60. As stated, the story is that during these years the Personnel Management wing and the Institutional Labour Economics wing split. The latter became predominant as the subject grew, reflecting the spread of trade unions and collective bargaining. It was during this period that a substantial body of intellectually stimulating work (notions of workgroups, theories of unions and collective bargaining, the importance of institutions in markets and of markets as institutions, the notion of internal labour markets, the “web of rules”) and policy relevant work was done in the US which no other country could or has matched and which was later to shape scholarship elsewhere. At the same time that decline began in the US, expansion occurred in the UK and that country enjoyed its golden age roughly from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. Reasons for the decline in Industrial Relations in the UK were in many ways the same as those in the US. Three comments may be registered on this interpretation of US and UK golden ages.

First, it is true that in both countries management was neglected, with deleterious consequences for the development of the subject. However, it should be noted that, in the US, Chamberlain (1948), Strauss and Sayles (1960), Slichter, Healy, and Livernash (1960), and others wrote on management. In the UK, there was less emphasis on management. But, again, it should be noted that various writers, such as Flanders (1970) showed how management had the main initiative and argued that it also had the responsibility for reform. The determining role of employers was stated most clearly in Clegg (1976) and, later, research began, for example, with Sisson (1987). At the same time, the study of Personnel Management continued in both countries, though often without much attempt at conceptualisation and theory. Kaufman cites some of these authors in both the US and UK (246-250 and 405 f.).

Second, in the UK, the so-called Oxford School was certainly very influential during the golden age. On the plus side, it left some useful insights and concepts (the importance of workgroups, the concept of “job regulation“, notions of dynamics between formal and informal systems) and a large body of empirical research. On the negative side, despite what has been said above, it largely failed to develop ideas on management and over time came to concentrate increasingly on the workplace. Also, in the case of some writers, the move to the left and the rejection of “reformism“, though perhaps temporarily stimulating, proved a dead end in the longer term (271-277, 388, 391-395). However, the emphasis on the Oxford School also downplays

other contributions. For example it downplays Phelps-Brown and Roberts who had, or came to have, a more critical perspective on British industrial relations. Indeed, despite the fact that several of the leading members of the Oxford School were historians, there was a somewhat Whiggish notion in their work manifested in the idea of the progressive forward march of trade unions and collective bargaining. In the longer run, alternative interpretations have proved more “correct” than those of the Oxford School. Finally, the account also leaves out Turner who produced one of the most original books on trade unions (1962) and whose work stands more in the tradition of Marshall, the Webbs, and Commons.

Third, Kaufman explains the spread of Industrial Relations in a number of ways. Considerable emphasis is given throughout to the borrowing and transference of ideas, especially from the US, and to institutionalised transmission processes such as the role of the ILO and IIRA. This emphasis is not surprising in a book which stresses the roots of the subject in the US and a book commissioned by the two latter organisations. However, the role of “crises” is also to be seen throughout – critical conjunctures and turbulence in industrial relations stimulates the growth of Industrial Relations. This fits nicely with the US story (with growth in the 1900s and 1910s and the 1940s and 1950s) and the UK story (with growth in 1890s and 1900s, in the trans-First World War period, and in the 1960s and 1970s). It might also fit with Australia, but perhaps less so Canada, though in both of these cases there was considerable borrowing from the US and UK. However, the crisis explanation leaves something of a problem with other countries. So, for example, why in France and Italy, where there were industrial relations problems through the first three post-Second World War decades, did Industrial Relations not develop to anything like the same extent? Why did it develop in the 1960s and 1970s in Japan when many of the problems of immediate post-Second World War industrial relations had arguably already been overcome?

Ways Forward

Throughout the book is concerned with the future of Industrial Relations – its survival, its transmogrification into HRM and Organisational Behaviour and the growing ascendancy of neo-classical Economics and perhaps also Psychology, with their relative lack of interest in institutional contexts. These are important considerations and will affect the research agenda and the development of theory about industrial relations. The dangers with the trends as identified by Kaufman include the following. The importance of institutions, especially macro-level political and economic contexts, will be lost. Management-labour relations and questions of employee voice may also be lost. Research may become more normative in a management direction. (Of course, it is not sufficient to counter that in the past Industrial Relations research was too normative in a trade union direction). However, according to Kaufman, there are two potential ways forward: better research and theory building and more contribution to problem solving. Here we concentrate on the former, drawing largely on, and inspired by, the Kaufman analysis.

First, there is a case for drawing some inspiration from the origins of Industrial Relations. Both the Webbs and Commons, influenced by the German Historical

School, were fundamentally interested in what Kaufman approvingly refers to as “the study of alternative regimes of labour market regulation and workforce governance” (628). Early scholars were mainly interested in patterns within countries, but also had some interest in differences between countries, though comparative research and theorising was mainly to develop after the Second World War with writers such as Dunlop, Kerr et al., and others. More recently various scholars have taken further this focus on regimes of workplace governance. Coming from the mainstream Industrial Relations tradition, Kochan, Katz, and McKersie (1986) have stressed strategic choice and systems transformation over time within one country. Katz and Darbishire (2000) have reminded us of the continuing and perhaps growing diversity of regimes within national systems and the implications this has for differences between systems. In other national traditions, the older French “societal effects” School (Maurice/Sellier/Silvestre 1982) and the newer French Regulation School (Boyer/Saillard 2001) have also stressed different macro-systems of governance and regulation. More recently, the new “Varieties of Capitalism” literature (Hall/Soskice 2001) focuses on alternative regulatory regimes and complementarities between their different parts. Other recent work and suggestive developments of this kind are cited by Kaufman on page 465. One set of challenges and tasks should be to develop these perspectives and, nesting within these broad regimes, to locate patterns of job regulation and webs of rules governing work, employment, and management-labour relations.

Second, more work has now been done on employers and management and this will undoubtedly continue. In this respect HRM has performed a useful function, bringing management more to centre stage. However, much of the work is micro and, as stated, there is a danger that the broader institutional context of management will be lost. As already suggested, there is also some danger that much of the work tends to be normative and fails to contribute to the development of theoretical insights. Moreover, a new interest in employers and management should not be at the cost of leaving out employees and their voice aspirations. Here, though, it must be conceded that there are more forms of legitimate voice than trade unions and collective bargaining and research must also encompass different voice regimes including works councils, joint consultation, direct employee involvement, and also what Commons referred to as the “goodwill” model of management and what we might refer to as the high road of sophisticated human resource management. Nor should the new focus on management be at the cost of leaving out government and the law, for here arguably there is a growing trend towards the juridification of many aspects of the employment relationship – the advance of what the Webbs called “legal enactment”, the form of employment regulation which they wisely predicted would expand more than others.

Third, turning to methods and theory. After various attempts (starting with the Webbs and Commons and later largely following Dunlop), it should be recognised that there can be no integrating general theory in Industrial Relations. This seems to be the position taken by Kaufman (621-631). Indeed, no Social Science has a single integrating theory. Economics perhaps comes closest to this with neo-classical theory, but even in Economics we see aspects of the theory relaxed and set aside, not to mention the existence of heterodox theories. Industrial Relations has been essentially a

multi-disciplinary area – as Kaufman states it has aspired to be “inter-disciplinary” but in reality this has been “only modestly practiced and realised” (271, 385). Industrial Relations should continue to draw on other areas of the Social Sciences in order to develop theory and help with problem solving. In addition, as in the past, it should be eclectic and use whatever data and whatever methods are available and appropriate. Though Industrial Relations has tended to be inductive in its basic approach, many writers have been prepared to work with deductive models to explore and test their hypotheses. Indeed, this was how the Webbs proceeded in their economic analysis of trade unions (166-168).

Kaufman stresses that borrowings can be made from both the old and new Institutional Economics. To this, he also suggests that Sociology, especially the New Institutional and Economic Sociology, and Political Science have much to offer, in terms of both micro-level processes and increasingly in terms of more macro level governance systems. Psychology has long made a contribution to the study of industrial relations, though in the form of the Human Relations this was sometimes misinterpreted and often denigrated by many in Industrial Relations. Recent ideas about the psychological contract have much to offer. Kaufman states that Law has not contributed much to Industrial Relations (69-72). This is debateable, especially in continental Europe. But certainly the law has massively affected industrial relations, as the employment relationship has become more juridified in most countries (Supiot 1999). Here the new Law and Economics literature may have contributions to make in terms of the study of regimes of governance and their origins. Finally, History continues to have much to offer. Drawing not just on Labour History, but also on Social and Business History and on various Social Science traditions, scholars have recently started to reinterpret the history of industrial relations and offer revisionist periodisations and assessment of turning points and strategic choices (Jacoby 1985, 1997; Gospel 1992; Howell, 1992, 2005).

Conclusions

Kaufman has produced a magnificent book. It is particularly stimulating on the predecessors and early origins of what came to be called Industrial Relations. It provides an insightful overview of the golden ages of Industrial Relations in different countries. The analysis of the reasons for decline in the Anglo-Saxon world are compelling. Possibilities for developments in other countries are considered. Ways forward are tentatively suggested. However, one moral is that we should not be preoccupied with the professional and institutional survival of Industrial Relations. The main aim is to study industrial relations as broadly defined, within different governance regimes. The issues and problems surrounding industrial relations are no less important than in the past.

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